

# My Doctorate: How to Work and Study

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## MY DOCTORATE

When asked to draw a picture of himself learning Spanish, to my horror, Thomas (pseudonym) a seven-year-old pupil in my class, set about drawing a big black square and enthusiastically colouring it in. My emerging understanding of the use of colour and form from a Jungian perspective, meant that I interpreted big black squares as a signal of emotional problems, or problems at home, coupled with difficulties in expressing emotion (Malchiodi, 1988). However, I asked him about his picture. He replied: "I'm learning Spanish inside a submarine, and it's dark inside a submarine, that's why it's black".

This, my first experience as an enthusiastic research student studying for my Doctorate in Education, made it clear that I had a lot to learn. It dramatically underscored the importance of having conversations with children about their drawings. Insights can be uncovered which are otherwise unavailable from the critical analysis of an adult researcher. This experience highlighted for me the importance of including the creator in the interpretation of the drawing's meaning and purpose.

My interest in increasing an understanding of how children learn, through engaging with their drawings, was engendered initially from my role as a primary school teacher. The research concept of engaging with children's drawings in the classroom was stimulated by the work of Lynn and Douglas Newton (1998). They investigated the impact of the introduction of Primary National Curriculum Science (National Curriculum Council, 1993) lessons on children's ideas about, and stereotyping of, scientists. They specifically looked at whether increased weekly hours in learning science had any impact on children's tendency to draw scientists as male, bald, be-spectacled and wearing white coats. Perhaps not surprisingly, the stereotype was found to prevail, despite an increase in the children's exposure to many different aspects of science and scientists. The fact that these published researchers utilised primary school children's drawings to uncover hidden thought processes, specifically what a scientist looks like, inspired me to use this method and ask children to draw themselves learning Spanish.

So far, so predictable. However, student experience is a special experience in so many ways. I am inspired by my participants, by the subject matter, by the idea of becoming a Doctor of Education. But what has been challenging? What have I done to overcome my challenges? Could outlining my struggles help other students? I have three pearls of wisdom to offer, which I think are relevant to all students young and old.

The first thing that I would say about my student experience, is find out what kind of student you are and use this knowledge to help you. I now know I need to be around people and that I'm an awful procrastinator. It wasn't until I had been struggling, alone, for a while that I started asking people to help me. I enlisted selected members of my family and a friend to act as 'writing coach'. It surprised me how happy people are to be your inspiration. I sit in a friend's house and type away while she cooks. I send thousands of words to my mum to read. I read out my work aloud to another friend, who discusses what she hears, and here's the thing, if what you've written doesn't make sense to an intelligent lay person, it needs re-writing. I have learnt that academic writing needs to be clear above all things. Use everything you can to read your work to make sure it is clear.

Secondly, I have learnt that to write is to learn. To become an academic is to become a writer. Perhaps this shouldn't have surprised me. But it did. Find ways of improving your writing. I found a brilliant list of verbs with which to enhance my writing. I gave it to my students on the BA and, for those students who used the list, I found that the sophistication of their writing was enhanced. There are formulas that work. Always remember the person reading your thesis is a human being. Nobody said that academic writing had to be boring!

Finally, I have discovered the pitfalls of reading too much. Yes, I know. I am a doctoral student, there is a lot to read! But the maxim *nulla dies sine linea* or 'never a day without

a line', which means 'write something every day' is a good rule to live by not only when you have a full time job and are doing a doctorate. This is something I wish I could say that I followed. I know my supervisor swears by it.

## CONCLUSIONS

My student experience so far can probably be summed up by saying: find something you're interested in, discover support mechanisms, and goals, and put in the time to write.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and approved it for publication.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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